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SOME FACTS AFFECTING THE ASSIMILATION OF THE IMMIGRANT

Americanization

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WITH the first rumble of the German guns in Belgium came the consciousness that the United States might be involved in the European struggle and that a new and stronger national consciousness must be created. We were aware that this country was confronted by a vast unassimilated mass of alien population whose national affiliations were uncertain, whose political ideals were unformed, whose social and economic life was unrelated to American standards and American needs.

To what extent this unassimilated mass constituted a real menace to American institutions in peace and to American safety in war no one knew and few cared. Ignorant and blind patriotism must have its enemies real or imaginary in order to sustain life. The more ignorant we are of the strength and cunning of the enemy, the more we can emotionalize the danger, the more we can develop strength on the wing of imagination. The Americanization movement was therefore born in fear. Now that the war is over it is dying of convulsions.

But while the hosts of Americanizers were demanding human sacrifice and were feeding upon the freedom and innocence of millions of foreign human beings, thousands of intelligent Americans were working with the foreign groups giving them of the

treasures of the traditions of this country and securing from them loyalty and self-sacrifice, as was evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of men who willingly went into the war, and the millions upon millions of dollars that these very elements contributed towards the financing of the war.

To one who knows the soul and spirit of the immigrant, who has passed through the painful experience of analyzing, sorting and accepting American life, the spectacle of the rabid and ignorant Americanizing efforts was disheartening. It did not represent America as the foreigner has pictured it in his dreams before landing upon these shores. It flavored more of Hungary where the magyarization of several millions of people was attempted by means not consistent with American tradition, or of Russia of the Tzarist days with the persecution of the Jew and the denationalization of the Poles. For these reasons the Americanization movement could not survive during normal times. It was a negative movement; one that demanded human sacrifice and which did not stop with the expressions of the mob, but dragged into the struggle some of the high officials of the United States Government. Should we be surprised or sorry that it is now denied by many of the spontaneous organizations of the war period and that it is allowed to pass away of auto-intoxication and will remain unmourned by its once staunch friends?

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I am aware that some honest workers still maintain that there is room and need for some kind of a movement which, for want of a better name, might be called Americanization. I am even willing to admit that much can be done to create and maintain a strong national consciousness which was not extant during the war; but that the word Americanization has fallen into disrepute is generally admitted, and a new name is being sought to take the place of the discredited term of the war period.

Many social and political movements fail not because of their aims but because of their methods. The best intentioned efforts have often failed because they were conceived for selfish reasons and were pursued without regard to the human elements involved. A movement that is born in sympathy and not hate, understanding and not suspicion, patience and not haste, appreciation and not contempt will succeed and the future efforts towards the assimilation of the foreign elements in this country should recognize these facts.

Before developing any kind of program of Americanization, if the term is to be retained, it is well to determine what could be rightly included under this term and what the elements to be contended with are.

A foreigner is an individual who has been removed from his normal native environment with its customs, language, aspirations, folk ideals, racial and national loyalties, economic adjustment and legal control and placed in a new environment which he has neither the means nor the power to understand. It would be a remarkable mentality that would honestly accept American life unchallenged and it would be a dangerous and dishonest alien who would pretend to know and love this country without going through

a long and painful process of assimilation. During the war we were more willing to accept the pretense of Americanism than to accept the honest challenge of the unassimilated to prove the high qualities of American life as superior to the life of the home country. We accepted simulation as assimilation and forgot that the dictum in Rome to do as the Romans do is merely etiquette that belongs to the group of conventional lies that have no room in true assimilative effort.

Let us see what the foreigner had to give up in the process of assimilation:

Language. No one should sympathize more with the effort to accept a new language in place of the old than the American who has from time to time made an effort to learn a new language. Yet, during the war, laws were passed prohibiting the use of foreign languages in assemblies of foreign-born persons; foreign language papers were suppressed or watched as we would watch dangerous criminals; persons who spoke a foreign tongue were constantly suspected of disloyalty or un-Americanism. All this was done in the face of the obvious fact that the laws and customs of this country can just as well be explained in French, Polish or Russian, and that in the case of the foreign groups their own language was the only medium through which we could have reached them and through which education in American ways could be achieved.

I have often said that I would rather the immigrant would love America in German than hate America in English. To fear that the speaking of a foreign language is detrimental to loyalty is as absurd as to think the Swiss are not a united nation because French, German and Italian are spoken in Switzerland.

As I look back upon the environment in which I first saw the light of

day and in which I spent my childhood and compare it with the radical changes that have taken place in my mode of living, point of view and sympathies, I am startled to think that such a radical change in one's life and aspirations and ideals could take place within comparatively few years. Some of these changes have been gradual and unconscious, while others have been more violent and not without a certain intellectual and spiritual resistance and resentment. None of them have been the result of conscious, organized Americanization from without, but they have achieved, nevertheless, what I am bold enough to consider a rather thorough Americanization. Throughout this transformation I have endeavored to retain whatever of the old ideals and aspirations I felt were helpful. They have kept me nearer to the people and achievement of Europe without in any way interfering with my new adjustments and new mode of life. One can more easily accept the tradition of New England if his own tradition is not subject to violence; one can more readily understand the genius of American institutions in home, in church, in politics, in art and in literature if some respect is shown to their own genius in these fields of human endeavor. Methods that tend to create resistances are not only un-American but are inexpedient in achieving the results desired.

No one is responsible for his race or his nationality, but each person must assume responsibilities for the standing of his race or nation in the world and its perpetuation. America tends to denationalize its immigrants and destroy or absorb their racial characteristics. During the war Anglo-Saxon civilization was held before the immigrant as the highest achievement of the most highly developed race.

Anglo-Saxon and American civilization were confused. The result of this confusion was that all the scores of nationalities and races of this country were expected to accept ways of living and thinking, not of a new nation, but of an alien nation with which America has only remote relations and affiliations. The immigrant who had come to this country to find a great heterogeneous mass of people sharing a new political and social ideal found himself confronted with the problem of accepting as fact the presumptions that what is not Anglo-Saxon is not American, and that his race and national characters must conform to a strict code which is not the creation of a great synthetic mass of peoples from the four corners of the earth but the strict code of a civilization which controlled the destinies of this country a century and a half ago.

To this was added the artificial and unfortunate classification of people into native, alien and enemy alien. Where there was unity the war created antagonisms and where there was loyalty we made every effort to instill fear. We came out of the war less Americanized than we went into the war, and it was all due to Americanizers and their lack of understanding of their task and their subjects.

Had we recognized that only between equals or potential equals can peace and civilization develop and be of common benefit, the new national consciousness created by the war would have been justified and would have been creative of a new national life.

There was a certain respect for the immigrant who had become an American citizen during the war. With many it was merely a protective coloration so useful in concealing old aspirations, ideals and suspicions. Unassimilated citizenship is more dangerous

to American institutions than the mass of aliens which remains unassimilated and does not endeavor to participate in the affairs of government. Yet the Americanization movement centered its attention upon the making of legal citizens without regard to the essential requirements of intelligent citizenship. I have always had more respect for the alien who refuses to accept American citizenship before he is ready for it than for the man or woman who seeks such citizenship not as a prize for service but as a protection against suspicion. A foreign government that would compel any American to deny his allegiance to this country as the price of enjoying the privilege of residence would be looked upon with scorn by America. Do we owe less to other governments in our relation to their citizens?

From what I have said within the limited scope of this brief article it may be gleaned that I am opposed to the Americanization movement as conceived and carried on during the war by many classes of workers. I am opposed to this movement because I believe in Americanization, because I feel that to Americanize the immigrant is a solemn duty of America and because I know that we can not take away one's nationality without first accepting that nationality as an asset to be respected, and as a gift that must in part be incorporated in the sum total of American civilization. The weaving of national and racial characters of the alien into the fabric of American civilization is the real task of Americanization. If we refuse to accept this doctrine we should close our doors to the immigrant or exclude him from ever becoming a part of this country's national life.

I have dealt rather scathingly with a movement that has attained much power and some prestige in this coun-

try. The sooner the movement is forgotten the better for the immigrants and for America. The question may justly be asked, however, as to what should be done? In answer to this may I state that long before the war much good work was done by the social settlements and the churches, the charitable organizations and the protective agencies, the schools, the industries and the labor unions.

There are, however, a few aspects of the problem of Americanization that would lend themselves to a constructive program that would contain none of the elements of fear and suspicion characteristic of the movement during the war. These are:

Fair treatment in relation to American institutions. This would mean ample protection of the immigrant from the moment he lands in the immigration station to the time when he becomes self-reliant and independent in dealing with his own personal problems. One injustice in industry or the courts will do more to delay or destroy confidence in the good will of this country than can be established by all efforts to teach the immigrant the intricacies of American government and American life. The force of experience is vastly more potent than book education.

I wish I might recite some of the difficulties and problems that I encountered during the first two years of my stay in this country as an immigrant. My own experiences point to the need of immigrant protection as the most important means of creating a type of mental receptivity which is the first essential in all effort towards assimilation.

Recognition of racial and national values is another element that can not be disregarded in assimilative effort. These foreign groups bring with their new hopes and ambitions

certain cultural backgrounds and characters that we might do well to study and as far as possible leave unchanged in their process of assimilation.

The monumental work on *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki indicates the need and the extent of such studies. If we are to deal fairly with a problem of denationalization we must deal scientifically with the material to be handled and evaluate it in terms of the new nationalism which we are endeavoring to create in this country.

Immigrant education as represented by the schools and the social agencies has the one serious defect of being devoid of spontaneity. Little or nothing is left to the initiative of the immigrant and not infrequently the teaching staff is unable to understand the fundamental and elementary principles of race and national psychology. We must train the teachers to meet this important need in the teaching profession, but above all we must leave to the immigrant some choice as to the studies he is to undertake.

In the teaching of citizenship we frequently find that there is no opportunity for practical experience or self-expression. The fact that there are so many radical movements among the foreigners is an indication of their political-mindedness, but we seldom take advantage of it by organizing community councils, community centers and other organizations in which the immigrant may participate, instead of merely receiving education.

Recognition of national rights of the home country must be made a part of the Americanization movement. The attitude that America

has taken towards European nations has had its effects upon the rate of Americanization in this country. Whatever we may think about the feasibility of one's Americanism when he still holds affections for the home country we must recognize the fact that we can not break all ties or destroy all affection for one's country of birth. The justice dealt out to the home countries through the influence of American international relations is bound to have its effect upon the immigrant groups in America coming from these countries.

This country is a miniature Europe and it is not enough to give the immigrant a square deal here; we must apply the same principles to our relations abroad. The Irish question has baffled political parties in this country, but not so the Polish or the Macedonian questions. They have, nevertheless, been real factors in our political life and will be increasingly important questions as the reconstruction or confusion in European international affairs are participated in by this country. The loyalty of the Poles, the Russians, the Greeks, etc., in some measure will be determined by the international politics of the United States.

I have pointed out briefly what should be taken into account in the development of a constructive program of national integration in the United States. Protection, understanding, participation, acceptance of racial and national values and fair international relations are the sum total of what we need to recognize as fundamental to Americanization. All other factors will be dependent upon the loyalty that the movement shows towards these fundamentals.